DC COMICS
VERTIGO

Farewell MOONSHADOW™

J.M. DeMATTEIS
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Dedicated, with love and respect, to the memory of

Mamja Sheriar Irani—who knew the value of a good tale—

and to the living presence of her God-Brother,

Avatar Meher Baba

J.M.D.

For Julianna

JJM

special thanks to Allen Spiegel/Allen Spiegel Fine Arts

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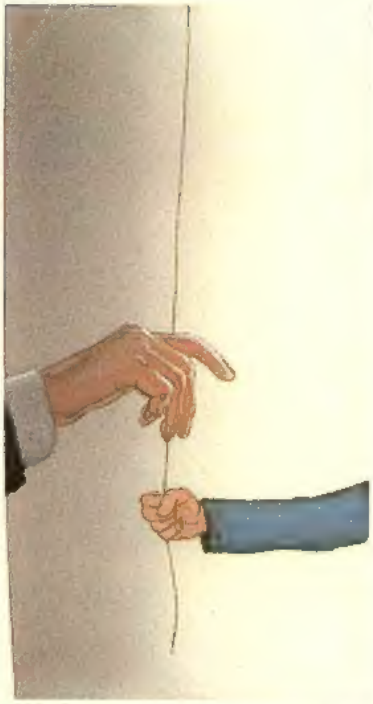
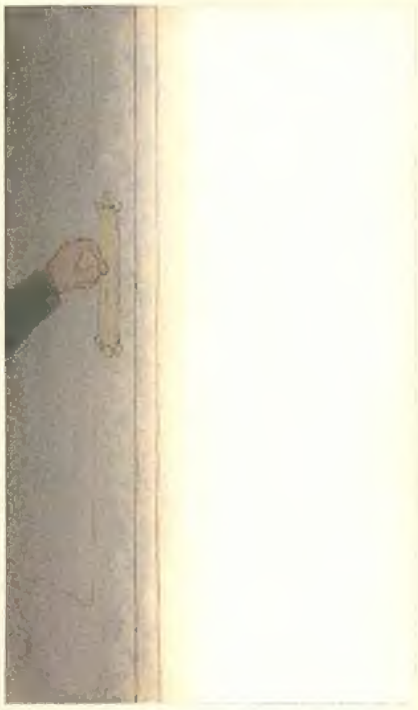
DECREPIT





BIRTHDAY

When he was a young man
(but old enough to know better)...

. . . *a* wanderer returned to a town he'd once lived in: a town built of Memory, Innocence, and a Joy infrequently glimpsed in his long years of wandering.

It was foolish to return, he was certain of that. What was to be gained from such a visit? Disillusionment? Sorrow? Disappointment, certainly. He fully expected to gaze upon a place so changed that it bore no relation to what he'd known before. And, as he stood on a hill, looking down at the little houses and green lawns and the children rushing, breathless (trailing kites, tossing balls, climbing fences), toward destinations both real and imaginary, he noted changes; but, to his great surprise, none were major enough to greatly alter the face of the town, and most were so minor that he almost believed no time had passed since his departure.

But time *had* passed: The house he'd lived in was long gone; how many of his old acquaintances, he wondered, were gone, as well—food for the worms, as we'll all be one day? He suddenly recalled the many seas sailed in the years between Then and Now: the foreign lands roamed, the strange sights beheld. The misery, the ecstasy, the infinite restlessness and the infinite calm.

For all that, an observer would have found the wanderer very much like the old town below: changed, but not enough to greatly alter his face. Though just past thirty, with a touch of grey in his hair and the faint hint of lines about his eyes, he was still trim and youthful; boyish in manner if not in spirit.

Standing there, one foot in Yesterday, his heart seemed weighted with melancholy—and, at the same time, empty of everything but a sweet nostalgia. He'd done so much in his wayfaring years; but what, he mused, had he accomplished that he couldn't have accomplished here? What had he learned that couldn't have been learned in this beloved and familiar place?

He turned his eyes toward the sun, a fat bright globe obscured by only a few slender clouds, and Something stirred in his memory; Something forgotten, yet inexplicably retained. He reached deep inside himself in search of that Something—sifting through echoes of thought and shadows of feeling—raising his hand to reach for the sun as he did so.

Both eluded his grasp.

Then, scooping up the bags that lay, scattered, around him, scooping up the overfed cat that mewed and rolled and danced at his feet, the wanderer walked down the hill and entered the town.

Word soon spread about the stranger who had come among them; about the ramshackle house he'd purchased and set about restoring with feverish diligence; about the shop he soon opened, in the spot where a dozen shops had already tried and failed (*Tinker*, the sign read; *Inquire Within*); about his solitary ways and disquieting eyes.

There was resistance to his presence at first (a town so small was duty-bound to resist anything new—be it law, idea, machine, or man), but the stranger melted it with his efficiency. Bring him a clock uncuckooed, a music box muted, a toy soldier wounded, a lamp sick with darkness—and he would not just repair it, but *restore* it: what was used and broken became perfectly, impossibly new again; all this for a fee so modest that even the most bored and contentious among them dared not argue.

He was odd, everyone agreed upon that (more than odd, some said: irredeemably eccentric); but this seemed to suit a man who had the power to heal the inanimate; who felt more at home with things than people.

And, soon enough, he was accepted as one of them.

Tinker

After the workday was done, the tinker would retire behind locked doors, but on rare nights—when the sky was clear, the moon so bright and full it looked ready to give birth—he would take to the porch, stretching out on an old swing, cat on his shoulder, tarnished flute at his lips, and play.

The songs he piped were peculiar (what else could be expected of such a peculiar *man*?), but beneath the disjointed melodies and curious tempos lay Something that all listeners (and he had many 'though none were so bold as to do it in plain sight of him) were drawn to: Something frightening and seductive; essentially unknowable—yet known.

His performance done, the tinker would sit for a time, staring at the silver globe overhead, as if waiting for the moon to do something: laugh, weep, shout praise, scream rage (As far as his hidden audience could tell, it never did.)

Then, flute tucked in his waistband, cat secure on his back, he would go up to bed.

His sleep was always fitful; rich with absurd and horrible dreams

The young woman walked past the shop every afternoon, pacing nervously, lingering too long, muttering to herself, making bird-like, tentative moves toward the door; but she lacked the courage and inevitably turned away, damning herself for a coward and a fool. Still she returned each day, hoping that—closing up early or emerging to stretch stiff limbs—he would see her; that their eyes would lock—and he would remember.

(One might ask why she didn't come by at the close of the day, or call at his house, or send a message asking him to call at hers. There are no answers to such questions; we can either draw our own conclusions or refrain from inquiring.)

Weeks went by like this, and she found herself growing more and more nervous, distracted; alternately giddy and sullen. Her aged aunt, afraid her niece was dying of some exotic and contagious disease, called in the doctor, who, in turn, assured the old woman that there was nothing wrong beyond a slight case of insomnia.

And the young woman struggled to contain herself; and she continued to walk past the shop.

TINK

One night, her body so bloated with thoughts of him that it pained her to stay in bed, she walked out to the balcony beyond her room. It was autumn, but she threw off her robe, desperate to feel the breeze run its cool hands over her. Standing there, a new and frightening idea seized her, all at once: She was suddenly certain that the man in the shop was not, could not *possibly* be, the man she thought he was. This idea was so painful, so ridiculous, that she found herself laughing.

From below, there came a deep laughter, echoing hers. Then someone called her name, and it rose, like a balloon, from the gardens beneath the balcony: "Bettina?"

Elated, appalled, fighting back tears, she called back: "Moonshadow?"

But when she looked down, no one was there.

He'd once nurtured dreams of a Perfect Love, a Perfect Mate, a Perfect Life—but, in his years of wandering, Moonshadow had learned that Perfection was slippery, at best. He'd been with many women, loved his fair share of them, lusted after even more; but it was always a matter of time—days, weeks, occasionally years—before the adored face turned suddenly lined or cruel; the golden hair, thin as straw. A sweet voice became strident. A body that had once fulfilled all his passions grew cold and sallow as a corpse.

He was no idiot. He realized that his lovers were seeing the same egregious flaws in him, as well, and that they were as relieved as he—probably more so—when the affair ended. Solitude and loneliness—two things which had once driven him to suicidal despair—were now embraced with dark satisfaction. Better, he'd think—setting off on another adventure to the edge of the world and beyond—to be a frustrated celibate than suffer the agonies of love one more wretched time.

But then he'd be caught by flashing eyes or a ripe breast, a seductive laugh, a tempting intellect—and love would grab his heart and squeeze so hard that logic would burst out his ears and reckless chaos would flood his veins.

Inevitably, after days, weeks, occasionally years of eternal vows and unchecked passions, he'd find himself alone again. Miserable again.

And strangely happy in his misery.

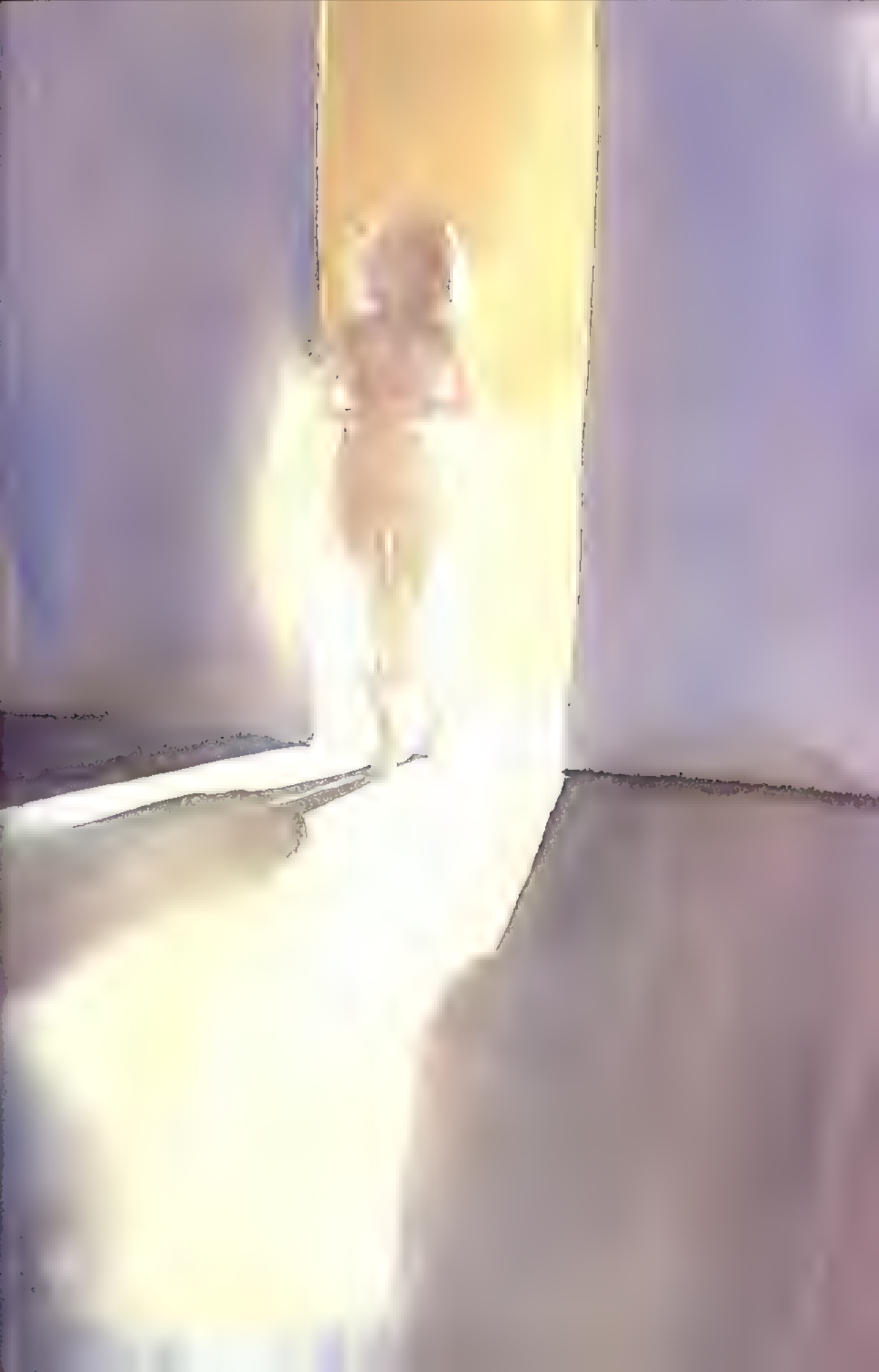
Why, he wondered, was Bettina so different? He'd known her last when they were little more than children: he a boy, clumsily seeking manhood, desperate to capture the secrets of Creation; she a pale lamb of a girl, equal parts silent melancholy and bright laughter.

They'd sit for hours reading together, or playing games of imagination, scaling hills, walking through woods; talking, in their artless way, of life and loss, magic and mystery. Like brother and sister, like best of friends, they'd hold hands, kiss goodnight: hug, weep, laugh, dance. All with a naturalness, a lack of self-consciousness, so total that neither even knew it existed.

Yet now, all these years later, he'd find himself following her from a discreet distance, for miles at a time; standing, in the dead of night, in the wind and snow, under her balcony, taking great solace in the knowledge that she was sleeping above him—and yet feeling, for all the world, like a pervert, a Peeping Tom, a degenerate.

But it wasn't sex he was after (although once, when she walked naked onto the balcony, his head swam, his hands trembled, and his chest ached so he thought he was having a heart attack), it was something far more elusive, and far more permanent:

It was Perfection



He'd find himself obsessing on her as he worked in the shop; imagining her at his side sharing his hopes, his dreams; his fears, angers, and joys. And, yes, his passions, too.

Yet when he'd see her there, pacing back and forth outside his door, he'd turn away: embarrassed, ashamed. He was certain she was out there because she'd read his mind, looked into his soul, and seen his fantasies. He knew why she was hunting him, what it was she wanted to say: "Stop *thinking* of me! Stop filling your head with *dreams* of me!"

So, while his cat would rake its claws against the glass, mewling at her, Moonshadow would sit, still as a statue, staring down at the wreckage on his desk; Bettina hovering, all the while, over his shoulder like a vengeful phantom.

He knew that he dare not look up.

Because then his dreams might come true.

One day, to his complete astonishment, her aunt came storming into the shop, dripping rain and bile, waving her umbrella, shrieking like a fishmonger: hysterical, unintelligible. The poor woman, he thought, has finally gone mad. She'd always been eccentric—although harmless and quite charming in her way—but now she seemed to have turned violent, whacking him with the umbrella, thwacking him with her handbag. Kicking him, repeatedly, with her unfortunately pointed shoes.

When, to his relief, she finally collapsed, a weeping heap, on the floor and he took her in his arms, realizing—suddenly, and with such emotion that *he* almost began weeping—how much he'd missed this cracked old woman, she calmed considerably and told him about Bettina.

She was sick, Aunt Marigold wept. Dying! And it was all because of him! "Bettina takes no food," the old woman went on, "she lives on you alone! Drinks your eyes, breakfasts on your smile, makes snacks of your moods and urges!

"She hasn't slept for a month—just lies in bed all night, wide awake, dreaming of you!

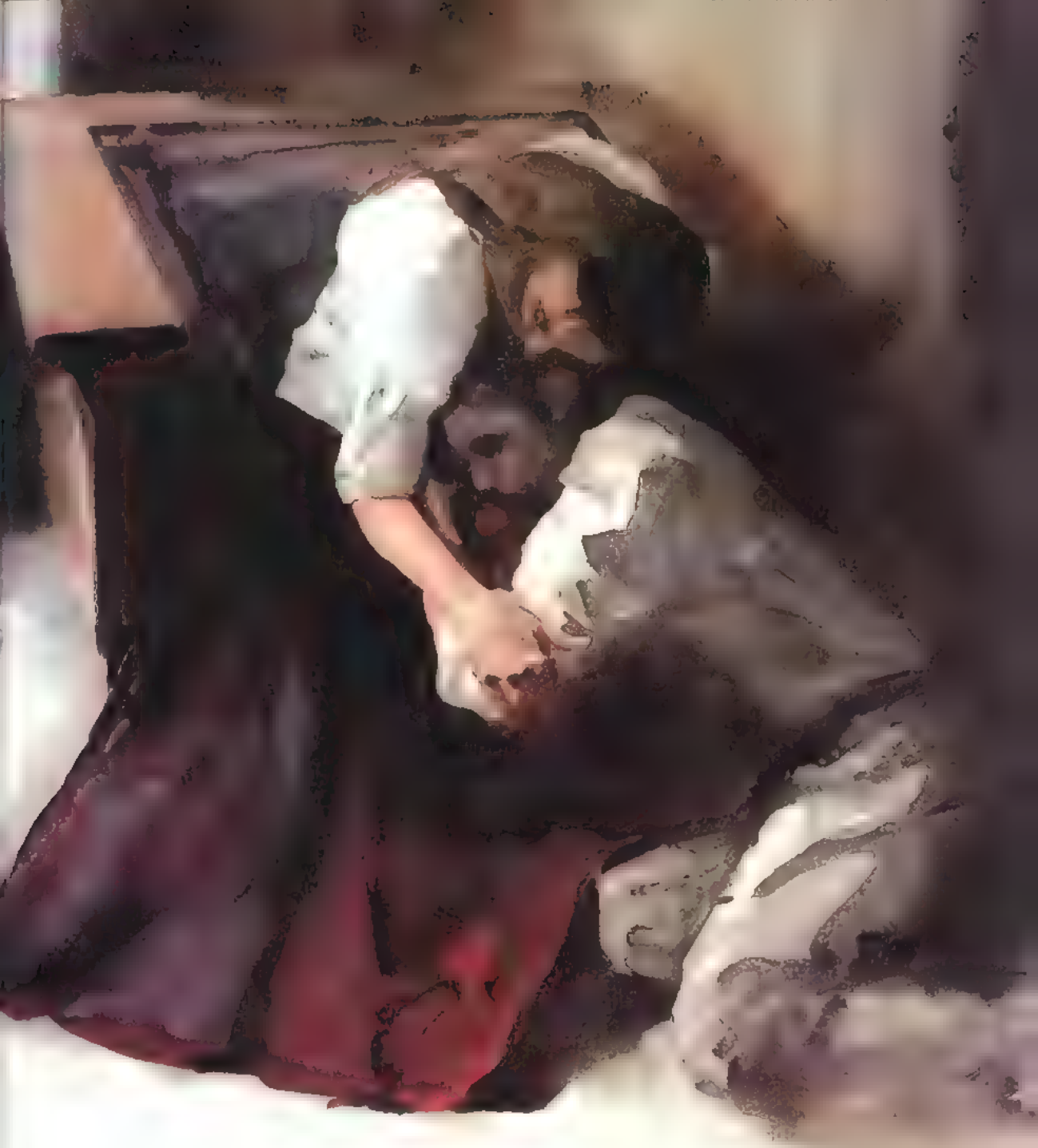
"She's pale, she's weak, she's lost all hope! All life!

"You're killing her, you young idiot!" Aunt Marigold finally exploded, whacking and thwacking and kicking again. "You're killing my Bettina!"

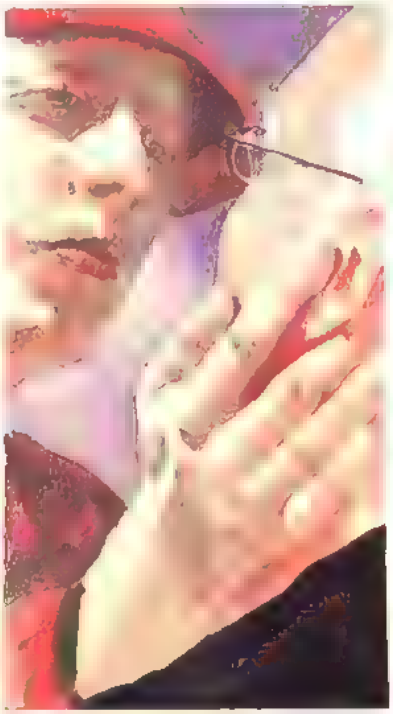
He snatched Marigold's umbrella and ran out of the shop, down cobbled streets, up crooked stairs, and into Bettina's room, collapsing at the girl's feet, begging her to live, to love him, to be his bride forever. "Till the end of time," he sobbed, "and beyond all time! Life after life after life!"

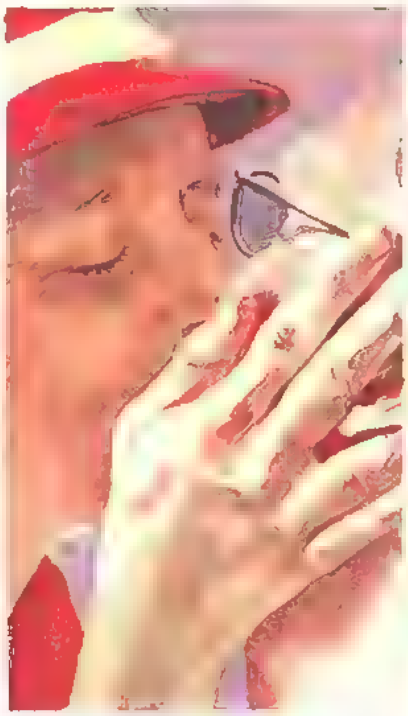
Bettina smiled, color flooding her cheeks, pride flashing in her eyes, and spoke one word: "Yes." She said it over and over: a song of praise. A mantra. A prayer.

"Yes."



They were married at midnight, beneath a fat and happy moon





Time passed,
love deepened

. . .Children arrived: three girls and a boy. Mia was first, fat and healthy. Charles was second, frail and thin. Then Charlotte, the moody one; and, finally, Katherine—the charmer. Each one was cooed over and cosseted, diapered, disciplined, and adored.

Bettina took to motherhood as sweetly and gracefully as she'd taken to marriage: "There's nothing in all Creation," she once told her husband, "more satisfying than a baby at your breast."

Moonshadow, too, found a joy and solace in his dears that he'd never thought possible. He'd often stand over their beds as they slept, studying their little hands, their twitching mouths, dancing to the sound of their nocturnal sigh-songs. He envied Bettina's milk swollen breasts—and wished that he could feed the children as his wife did. (He even attempted it once, putting Charles on his nipple. The boy bit down, Moonshadow howled, and Mia laughed so hard she wet herself.)

The arrival of the children transformed the parents' hearts in other ways: Their love for each other grew quieter, less melodramatic, than it had once been—and far more formidable for its silence.

"I feel," Bettina whispered, during a rare tranquil moment, "that you've slipped through my skin. That you vibrate in every cell of my body."

"Sometimes," Moonshadow replied, "I love you so deeply, I don't know where you end and I begin."

There were rare times—when the moon was particularly fat and bright, the night sky infinitely clear—when he would feel apart from her, apart even from himself: a distant observer of his own life, lonely beyond expression.

He yearned for something—a yearning so deep, so painful, that he'd often weep—and this yearning infuriated him. He had everything—love, family, prosperity—so why was he sprawled out like a drunkard on the front lawn, pounding his chest, staring at the moon? (The cat, too, stared, meowing with insufferable longing.)

The moon smiled back at him: sometimes gentle, sometimes mocking, sometimes playful, sometimes cruel. Moonshadow knew it held his answers.

But, what, he wondered, were the questions?

Every Sunday, Moonshadow would gather up the children and direct them in a play for Bettina's benefit. "All week," he told them, "Mother cooks, cleans, nurses and nurtures us all. Today we nurture *her*, in our own peculiar way."

He'd write during off-hours at the shop (occasionally trying out scenes on astonished customers, giving one-man shows atop the counter). Sometimes these entertainments would be based on familiar fairy tales; more often the young players would enact outrageous original tales, "based," their father always insisted, "on events from my own most extraordinary life!" The children had no doubt that these fantastic adventures were true—all except Charlotte. "They're lies," she'd huff—before throwing herself into her part with enough enthusiasm and melodrama to insure that her performance, above all, would make the show most memorable.

Eventually, word of these weekend theatricals spread—and the living room audience mushroomed to include nearly two dozen relatives, friends and neighbors (Aunt Marigold, especially, found the proceedings delightful). But it was only Bettina the players saw. Bettina—who would laugh and weep, stamp her feet and applaud; who—at the end of each performance—stood on her chair, whooping, demanding curtain call after curtain call.

The children were happy to oblige: holding hands and bowing with great solemnity—while the director watched from the wings: cheeks red, eyes bright.

Exorbitantly proud.

"This," Moonshadow would say (the children in bed, the guests gone, cradling his beloved bride in his arms)," is the most beautiful dream I have ever dreamed."

And it was.

Aunt Marigold died on a Sunday morning, an hour before the play. Knocked three times on the door with her umbrella, stepped into the parlor, and collapsed, stone-dead, in front of the children. Mia laughed, thinking it was a game, Charlotte found the sight of her Aunt's corpse grimly fascinating, while Katherine instantly knelt beside Marigold and prayed for her soul's deliverance. Poor Charles just hid his face in his mother's skirts—and cried, non-stop, for hours.

Bettina remained the soul of calm, gathering up the children, summoning the doctor, preparing the old woman's body for burial with her own steady hands. Aunt Marigold had been the first great light in the darkness of her childhood—but Bettina refused to surrender to what she considered melodramatic grief. It was only later—when the house was still, when all were sleeping, when the moon and stars hid themselves behind an armada of black clouds—that she stood alone on the balcony and wept silent tears for the woman who had been both mother and father to her.

Moonshadow refused to attend the funeral. He simply couldn't bring himself to go. Not that he was afraid to look upon death; he had seen its face many times during his years of wandering. But he felt that Marigold's passing marked the passing of something *else*, as well. He couldn't say what (or perhaps he couldn't admit it to himself), and his dread was all the more awful for its vagueness.

So while Marigold was laid to rest, the tinker sat alone in his shop: stomach coiled, head pounding, throat tight, trying desperately to lose himself in work.

But anything he touched that day seemed to instantly fly apart in his hands.

At first it was a gentle rain, but it grew in intensity in the course of the day.

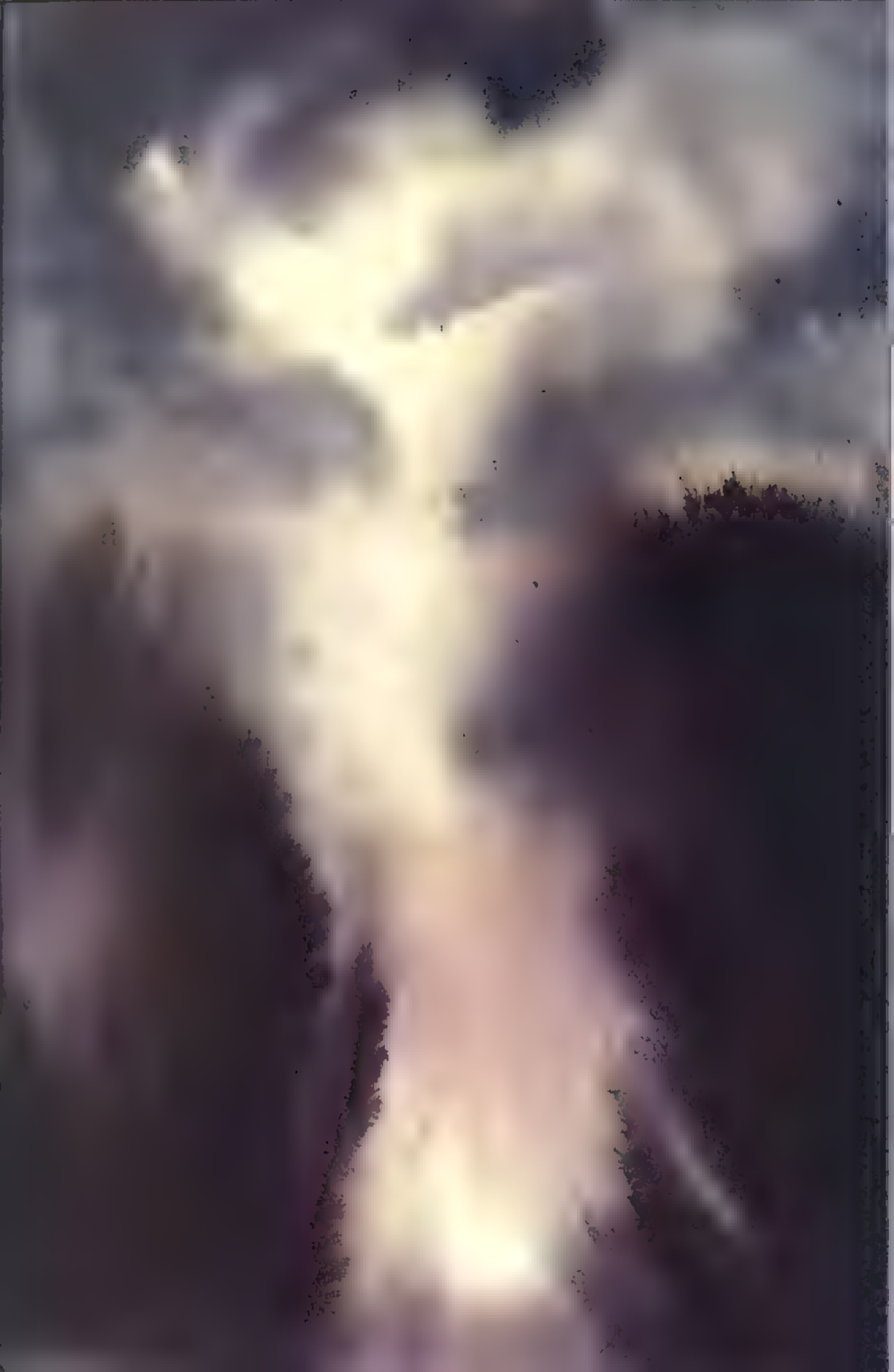
By nightfall the sky was lit by lightning. Thunder boomed, shaking tea cups from the shelves and children from their beds.

The winds rose in anger, howling madly, ripping branches from the trees, ripping trees from the earth.

And so it went for three unendurable days.

On the fourth day, the skies cleared. The sun returned for two hours.

Then the tornadoes came.



The man rose—bruised, bleeding, but miraculously alive He rose, surveyed the dead world, and wept. He dragged bodies from the wreckage and wept. He dug holes in the earth, laid the bodies to rest, and wept. For three days and nights he wept, this lone survivor, then turned his swollen eyes to the sky, to the fading sun, the rising moon, and spat words so vile he grew red with shame.

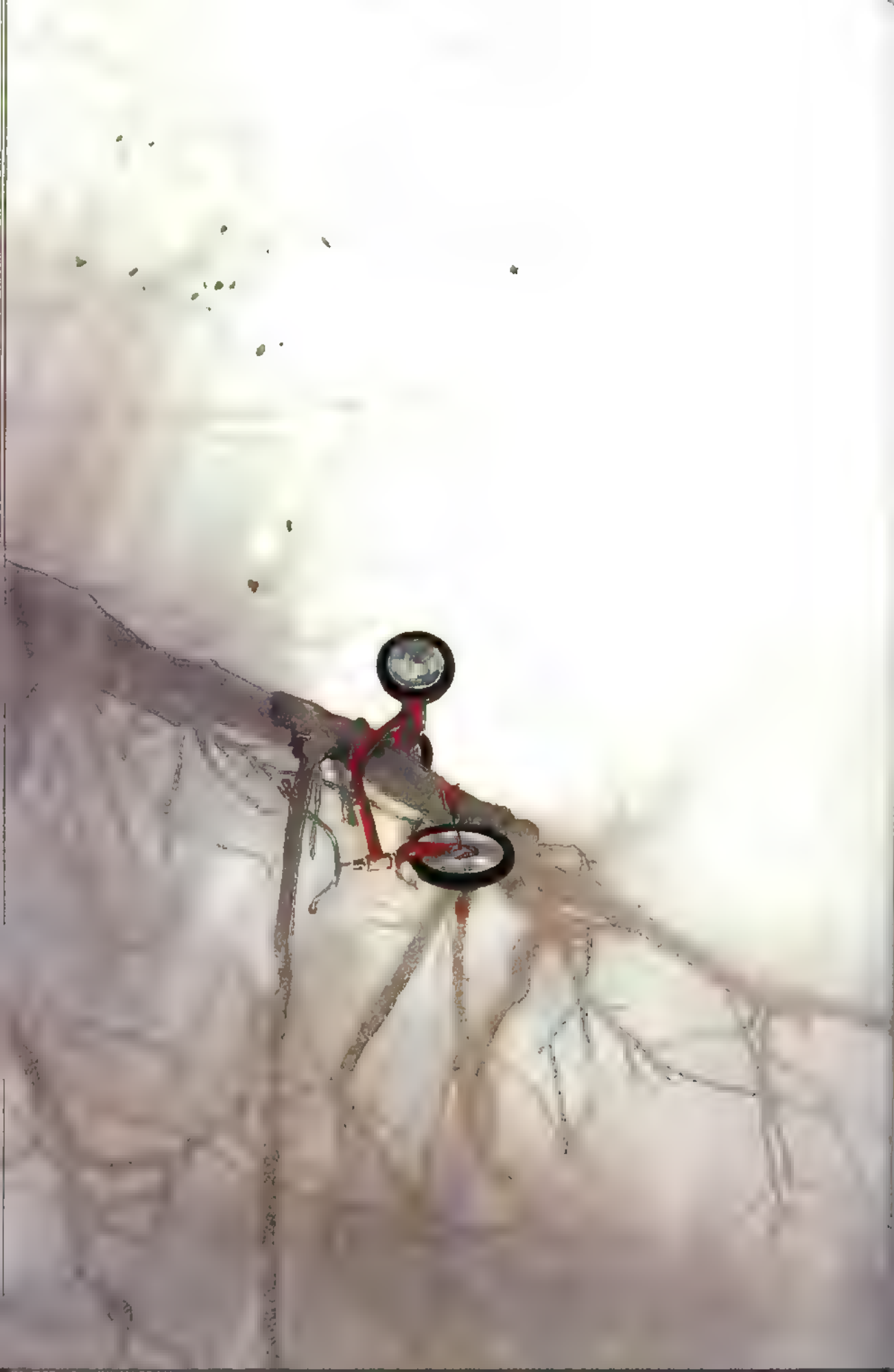
But he meant those words.

And he turned his back on the dead town, on the devil-sky, and walked up and over the hills—toward a future he had no interest in, a mystery he had no desire to unravel. He walked for three hours, then collapsed, then slept.

A plaintive mewling, eerie and familiar, awoke him. He opened his eyes to find himself face-to-face with his cat. Fur ragged, leg broken, the poor thing had hobbled out of the wreckage and followed him. For a moment he considered reaching out and snapping the cat's neck: such love and loyalty had no place in a world as cruel as this one. But instead he scooped the cat up in his arms, cradled him tenderly. Eyes that had cried themselves dry found fresh tears to shed. Names he'd been afraid to speak found awful expression on his lips.

" Mia," he sobbed. "Charles...Charlotte...Katherine..." Then his sobs coalesced into a ghastly sound, a howl of pain from the center of his soul, that shook stars from the heavens Birds fell dead from the trees, pierced by that hideous wail: "Bettiiiina, Bettiiiina, Bettiiiiina!" He cried out her name until his throat was raw, his vocal cords bleeding. Until his heart was cold. Until the past was as meaningless as the future.

Then Moonshadow struggled to his feet, draped his cat across his shoulders, and—under the pitiless gaze of a fading moon, a rising sun—continued on his way.



He tried, again and again, to kill himself:

Once he tied a rope to a tree, dangled there for hours, like a marionette in the wind, until the rope snapped and he fell to the ground, neck red and blistered: insufferably alive.

Once he jumped from a cliff edge to the jagged rocks below He broke both arms and an ankle, cracked his head, shattered a rib. He lay on the rocks from sunrise to moonrise, bleeding, waiting for the birds to pick his bones clean, the worms and maggots to feast on his flesh. The birds never came, the worms and maggots kept their distance. Disgusted, he crawled to his feet and staggered on

Once, on the steps of a church, he took a pistol, placed it against his temple, and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed. When he tossed the pistol away in disgust, it fired—shooting an old widow in the foot. She hopped and shrieked like a frog on hot coals. Despite himself, he laughed: a strangled, pathetic sound.

He became convinced that he was doomed to failure; that some Power, some Force, some Moron God wanted to keep him alive for its amusement. So, much to his cat's relief, he abandoned all thoughts of suicide and pondered ways to embrace death while still alive.

He frequented funeral parlors, spending uncountable hours in the company of corpses, seeking solace in their blind eyes, envying them their pallor and their peace. He frequented the lowliest brothels, fucking himself raw; hoping to empty himself of pain and sorrow and fill himself with incurable diseases.

He gambled away his clothing, ate garbage, shit in the streets. He was locked away in prisons and madhouses. He was laughed at and reviled.

But he was still Moonshadow—and that, more than anything, was intolerable to him.

The City was a cold and terrible place, where the poor lived in squalor, died in disgrace. Where the rich copulated and grew fat, laughing at the suffering of their fellow man. In a shadow-land between the poor and the rich lived the criminals: thieves and butchers who preyed on high and low without prejudice, who preyed on each other without shame.

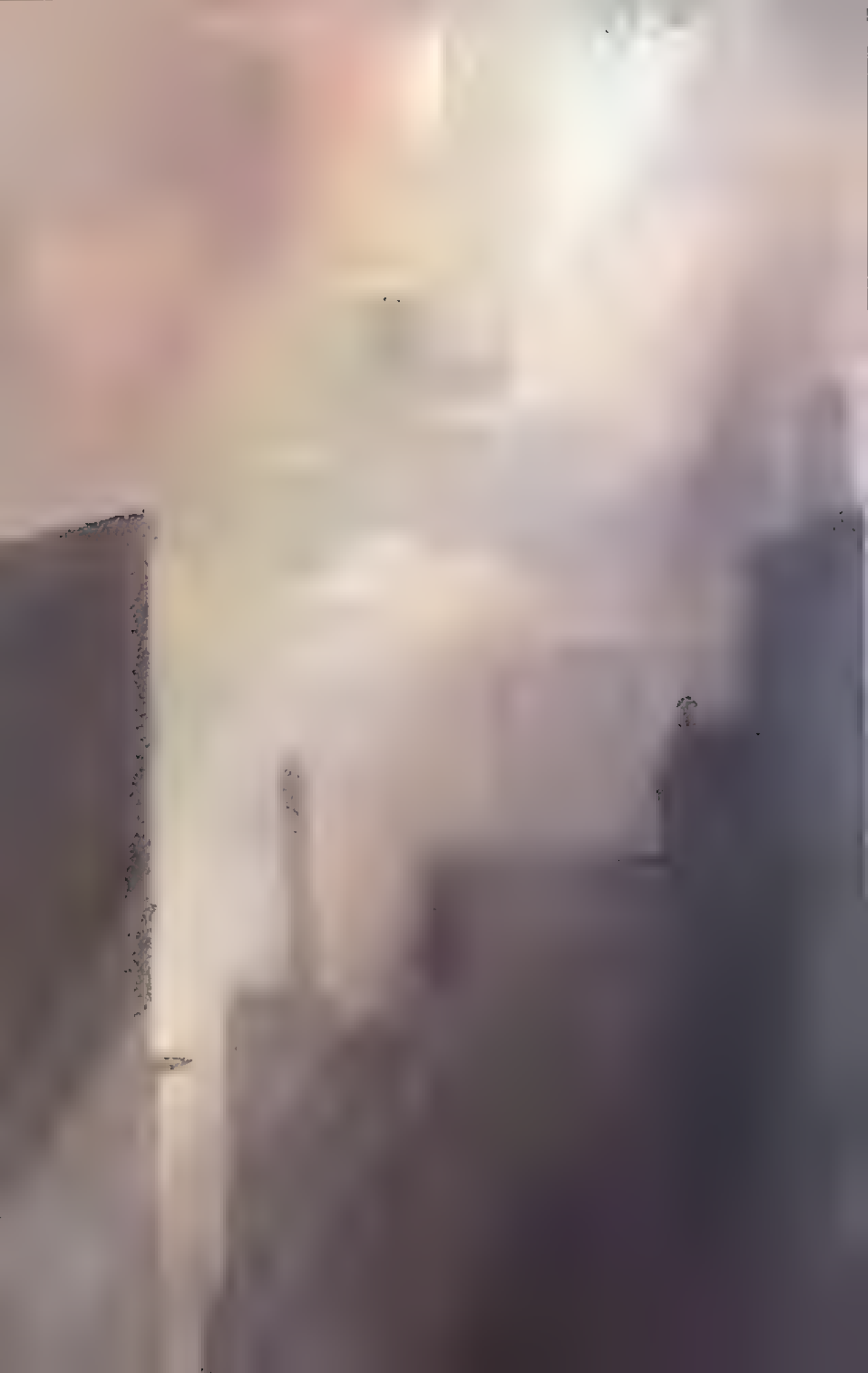
Yet there was one man whose life encroached upon all these worlds: He was rich, that was a fact (it was rumored that his riches were gained in a game of chance; a roll of the dice had turned him from pauper to king): yet instead of living in sterile perfection behind the gates of wealth, he dwelled in a ruined mansion in the slums. He had no friends (although he doted, like a ridiculous old woman, on his cat), yet his house was always full Whores and bankers, politicians and murderers: All were welcome under his roof.

He was cruel, he was violent, he was humorless and offensive, and yet he was capable of extraordinary acts of compassion. No destitute mother, no fevered child, who came to him seeking help was ever turned away. His house was overrun with mothers and children: they swarmed through the place like insects, like rats. And they adored their benefactor; worshipped him. He, in turn, looked upon them with revulsion and fear.

"I do this," he told one woman, whose words of teary gratitude were met with a scowl, "not because I want to, but because I have to. The shadow of a man, a fool, I once was demands that I help you. I struggle to resist him, but—to my eternal humiliation—"

There was a silence so pointed it nearly cut the woman's throat.

"—I cannot."



One night he couldn't sleep. Dreams of a past he thought he'd buried drove him out of his bed. Dreams not just of the wife and children he'd lost, but of his vanished youth, his vanished friends, his beloved mother—dead so many years. Dreams, too, of a father he couldn't recall, but who haunted his nights, nonetheless.

He walked to the window, turned his eyes toward the moon, a fat bright globe obscured by only a few slender clouds, and Something stirred in his memory; Something forgotten, yet inexplicably retained. He reached deep inside himself in search of that Something sifting through echoes of thought and shadows of feeling—raising his hand to reach for the moon as he did so.

The moon moved.

It moved! Dropping from the sky, eating through the clouds, growing brighter, growing closer, filling his eyes with its fat incandescence. It moved! Consuming stars, consuming trees, consuming wall, glass, window frame: bursting into his room.

The moon hovered there before him, its light obscuring everything but itself. How, he wondered, was this possible? How could the moon be here, in his bed-chamber? How could it be smiling at him? How could it be—

—*talking* to him?

But it did talk: not in words, exactly—but in a flow of information, of intuition. In a river of moonglow and stardust and angels' wings that washed over him, drove him to his knees, blubbering, bellowing, giggling like a little girl. Then the moon grew silent and so did he. And in that silence, he knew Something. To the bottom of his soul, he knew it.

And the moon departed, returning to its throne in the sky. Leaving behind a gift, a benediction, on the chamber floor:

A flute

He ran through the house, cat at his feet, rapping on the doors, shouting like a loon: "Wake up you thieves, you beggars, you whores! Wake up, you mothers and innocent babes!" He rapped at the doors, he pounded, he kicked—until everyone in the house was awake, gathered in the dining room, sharing looks of confusion, annoyance, and fear.

Moonshadow stood before them, grinning like an idiot, like a Moron God cast out of Heaven. He hopped up on the great table, opening his mouth to speak—then thought better of it. Instead he reached into his nightshirt, pulled out the flute and began to play.

The song he piped was peculiar, but beneath the disjointed melody and curious tempo lay Something that his reluctant audience was drawn to: Something frightening and seductive; essentially unknowable—yet known.

So piping he danced them out of the house (and not a soul questioned it, not a soul refused to dance with him, not a soul remained behind). So piping he danced them out of the City, through forests, across fields, over hills. So piping he danced them to the top of a hill, overlooking a ruined town. And they knew, each and every one of them, that this would be their new home; that, together, they would rebuild this place and find a contentment, a quiet joy, that none of them had ever experienced.

They knew, too, that the piper must be the first to go down. That he, and he alone, must dance these ruins back to life. Even the cat knew this, and hung back among the crowd as, flute at his lips, whirling like a dervish, sobbing like a child...

The piper descended.

When Moonshadow was an old man (but young enough to know better) he returned to a town he'd once lived in: a town built of Memory, Innocence, and a Joy infrequently glimpsed...

.in his long years
of wandering.

Farewell.

J.M. DeMatteis has written for newspapers, magazines, television, motion pictures, and, of course, comics. One of the most versatile writers in the medium, DeMatteis has been a full-time scripter for both Marvel and DC Comics for more than fifteen years. Applauded for his intense characterizations and spiritual themes, DeMatteis has won both popular and critical acclaim for a wide variety of projects ranging from super-hero sagas to groundbreaking graphic novels.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, DeMatteis currently resides in New York's Hudson River Valley with his wife, Diane, his son, Cody, and his daughter, Katie.

Jon J Muth was born in 1960 and educated as a painter. His comics work for DC/VERTIGO, Marvel, Eclipse Books, NBM, Donald M. Grant Publishers, Inc., and (in Japan) Kodansha has established him as one of America's more ambitious contemporary graphic novelists. He has participated in exhibits across the United States, and his work is in numerous private and corporate collections here as well as in Europe and Japan.

Muth lives with his wife, Julianna, and his children Nikolai and Adelaine in upstate New York. Currently, he is in the garden moving some large stones.

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